

# A Mindfulness Approach to Address Racial Microaggressions in the Classroom

Racial microaggressions are commonplace in higher education with negative psychological consequences for students of color, including isolation, disconnection, and a lack of support from faculty and peers. This brief provides instructors with a somatic based teaching strategy when racial microaggressions occur in the classroom. We outline how counselor educators can help students enhance empathy and cultural competence by remaining present with their discomfort after witnessing a racial microaggression, shifting their stance from defensiveness to curiosity, and increasing their self-awareness. Ethical considerations and assessment methods for this instructional activity are also explored.

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## KEYWORDS

*racial microaggressions, counselor education, contemplative andragogy, mindfulness strategies, multicultural competencies*

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# Introduction

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Racial microaggressions occur often in higher education, with graduate students of color expressing negative emotional consequences that include emotional distress, internalized feelings of inferiority, and a lack of belonging in their academic environments (Curtis-Boles et al., 2020; Maiden, 2021). Experiencing racial microaggressions over time can have deleterious effects on students of color's self-esteem and race-related stress, in addition to retention and degree completion (Curtis-Boles et al., 2020; Lilly et al., 2023; Maiden, 2021). Furthermore, hostile classroom environments can place graduate students of color as outsiders and in the unwanted position to speak for their entire racial group (Park & Bahia, 2022). Failing to acknowledge and address racial microaggressions with sensitivity and cultural humility can ultimately result in students of color feeling invalidated and coping in isolation (Jones, 2023; Joseph et al., 2023).

To avoid the aforementioned negative outcomes when difficult conversations on race occur in the classroom, it behooves instructors to provide a non-judgmental space for students to sit with their uncomfortable feelings and somatic reactions. Bentley-Edwards et al. (2020) stressed the need for educators to support students, when racially charged topics arise in the classroom, with empathy as well as “self-awareness, self-confrontation, and self-expressive methods” (p. 1250). One andragogical strategy to acknowledge, name, and process racial microaggressions in real time is the use of contemplative practices. Contemplative teaching approaches involve a variety of techniques aimed at enhancing students' self-awareness, empathy, and cultural competencies (Campbell et al., 2018; Hilert & Tirado, 2019; Martinez & Dong, 2020). One common type of contemplative practice is mindfulness, which Kabat-Zinn (2013) defined as the practice of intentional and nonjudgmental awareness of the present moment. This awareness encompasses not only what students are thinking, but also what they are experiencing at a somatic level. There is evidence to support how mindfulness enhances counseling students' multicultural competencies and how it improves their cognitive flexibility when encountering difficult emotions and cognitive dissonance (Campbell et al., 2018; Hilert & Tirado, 2019; Sappio et al., 2023).

Moreover, Dougherty et al. (2020) found that counselor educators who use mindful andragogy fostered trust, mutuality, acceptance, and authenticity in the classroom. The use of mindfulness was particularly helpful when multicultural issues arose in class, specifically in promoting students' ability to remain present and be an effective, active listener when broaching race-based discussions. Lastly, these authors posited how mindful andragogy enhanced communication between themselves and their students and strengthened their relationships with students.

Relatedly, embodied andragogy is an emerging focus within educational research which consists of learning approaches that integrate the entire body, rather than focusing on cognitions (Clughen, 2024). Moreover, embodiment andragogy challenges traditional mind-body separation found within traditional cognitive focused teaching practices. Grounded

in polyvagal theory, embodiment practices support the notion of one's physiological state having a profound impact on one's cognitive processing. Hence, polyvagal-informed learning exercises such as social co-regulation have been used in higher education classroom settings with promising results (Clughen, 2024). Furthermore, researchers posit that Aikido's self- and co-regulation skills hold potential as an embodied pedagogy for intercultural communication training. These skills help interrupt defensive physiological responses, enhance the body's ability to self and co-regulate, and help maintain openness and curiosity during intercultural communication conflict and perceived threats (De Baets & Van Praet, 2024). Menakem (2017) stressed how embodiment practices for race-based discussions can serve to "build [one's] self-awareness and deepen [one's] capacity for empathy" (p.17). The emotional intensity that can follow after experiencing a racial microaggression can be ameliorated through the integration of contemplative exercises and, similar to the Aikido study, might support students' ability to maintain meaningful engagement rather than withdrawing or shutting down.

## KNOWLEDGE GAP

Nascent research on general mindfulness practice on counseling students' multicultural competencies have demonstrated increased self-awareness, reduction of color-blind racial attitudes, and increased knowledge and skills related to counseling diverse clients (Baggs et al., 2024; Hilert & Tirado, 2019; Lenes et al., 2020). On an intrapersonal level, Dye et al. 's (2019) study explored the use of mindfulness to support counseling student wellness, with reported positive outcomes including physiological relaxation, as well as reduction of stress and anxiety in response to general difficult classroom discussions. However, we found only one study to date regarding empirical studies centering on mindfulness teaching practices and racial microaggressions. In this qualitative study, Mirick and Davis' (2022) focused on students' *cognitive* understanding of a microaggression, which included what constitutes a microaggression and the impact of the words and actions used within microaggressions. For this study, Mirick and Davis examined cognitive reactions of social work students after reading case study vignettes on race-based incidents in the classroom. Two primary themes that emerged from their study were the students' thoughts about 1) deciding whether or not to intervene and 2) specific actions to take when intervening.

What remains missing in the counseling literature is not just the *somatic* experience but also addressing a racial microaggression *in real time* in the classroom setting. According to Menakem (2017), centralizing the somatic experience when encountering racial microaggressions, while deemphasizing cognition, is the nexus of change and growth. Bartoli et al. (2015) echoed the need for students to "learn how to withstand their own anxiety, confusion, and uncertainty" (pp. 257-258) in order to develop genuine relationships, which can include the therapeutic alliance with future clients. Current counselor education research on mindfulness focuses on areas such as cultural competence and counselor self-awareness (Baggs et al., 2024; Dye et al., 2019; Lenes et al., 2020). However, to date, there are no known empirical or conceptual studies in the counseling literature that examines the use of mindfulness strategies as a specific intervention when racial microaggressions occur in a counselor education classroom.

Integrating mindfulness strategies, with an emphasis on the somatic experience, into the classroom, can help navigate difficult conversations related to racial microaggressions, while inviting students to explore their personal biases and cultivate a deeper understanding of systemic inequities (King, 2018; Lenes et al., 2020). King's RAIN activity aims to begin addressing this gap which consists of a 4-step mindfulness exercise, which centers the topic of race, to help students navigate and mitigate their emotional distress when racial microaggressions occur in the classroom.

## Description of Instructional Strategy

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The RAIN framework was originally used to help individuals after witnessing or being the target of a racially charged incident (King, 2018). Specifically, this exercise has been adapted from King's work to address racial microaggressions on the part of students and to provide space to slow down by turning inward and being with their experience without judgment. King's RAIN approach involves four steps: 1) Recognize what you are feeling; 2) Allow the experience to be there without judgment; 3) Investigate with curiosity how it shows up in your body and thoughts; and 4) Nurture yourself with compassion and care.

### PREPARATIONS

Prior to introducing the RAIN approach to students, it is essential for instructors to have the capacity to acknowledge and identify when racial microaggressions occur in the classroom. Dougherty et al. (2020) suggested counselor educators engage in their own mindfulness practices before teaching mindfulness exercises, as it can increase the effectiveness of particular mindfulness-based skills (e.g., intentional pauses, managing emotional discomfort). In alignment with Dougherty et al. (2020), we emphasize the benefit of engaging in a personal mindfulness practice, which allows us to authentically model and promote a mindful classroom environment. Therefore, instructors who intend to implement the RAIN instructional strategy should consider integrating mindfulness into their daily lives before introducing and teaching the activity to students. This can include here-and-now practices such as sitting meditation, breath-focused attention, disconnecting from technology, mindful eating or walking, and spending time in nature. To build this capacity, it would help—yet is not required—for instructors to have an ongoing mindfulness practice. With continued somatic practice, this consistency in remaining grounded can help foster emotional regulation and build the instructor's capacity to remain present with their own reaction as well as the reactions of their students when faced with a racial microaggression in the classroom (Dana, 2021). Similarly, exposing students to basic mindfulness practices throughout the semester, from the first day of class, will help them remain with their own emotions and bodily sensations when experiencing discomfort, instead of engaging in fight or flight (Dana, 2021). Instructors can invite students to participate

in brief mindfulness activities, lasting no more than five minutes, at the start of class time and can include strategies such as box breathing, guided meditation, and sitting in silence. Recommended websites, apps, and textbooks are provided below, in this teaching brief, for additional information.

## **THE RAIN FRAMEWORK: A MINDFULNESS CLASSROOM ACTIVITY**

The RAIN instructional strategy can serve as a preventive and responsive tool that instructors can use at any time throughout the semester. Instructors can introduce this activity as a separate lesson through the use of role plays or case scenarios, which can help students acclimate to experiencing these new steps. Additionally, instructors can also utilize the RAIN activity in real time, after a racial microaggression occurs.

The first step of RAIN begins with students identifying their somatic and emotional reactions after witnessing the racial microaggression. The following guiding questions and statements can assist students to connect with their bodies:

- “Return to your breathing and see if you noticed a change in your breath when the racial microaggression occurred.”
- “Where did you experience a change/changes in your body?”
- “What did you experience in those particular areas of the body? For example, did you experience muscle tension? If so, where and what feelings are associated with these bodily states?”

It is anticipated for students to express discomfort; hence, instructors can provide verbal reassurances of feeling uneasy while completing the first step of RAIN. To further normalize feelings of discomfort, instructors can provide a personal example of a feeling and where this feeling is experienced in the body (e.g., anger as communicated through a clenched jaw) prior to inviting students to do the same.

The second step of RAIN involves students staying with their somatic and emotional reactions to the experienced racial microaggression that occurred. While remaining in this full embodied state, and without judgment, students use words, images, and/or symbols to describe their experience of the racial microaggression. For learners who are neurodivergent, offering mindfulness based multisensory approaches (e.g., mindful walking, mindful listening, mindful observation) during the RAIN activity can be used (Finck et al., 2023). Offering flexible time frames to complete each step of the RAIN framework or breaking the activity into smaller parts allow neurodivergent students to engage in this activity at their own pace (Finck et al., 2023).

For the penultimate RAIN step, students are challenged to investigate their thoughts and bodily sensations from their cultural lens. Here, students investigate how the racial microaggression interacts with their racial socialization. Racial socialization refers to the ways in which “individuals learn about, interpret, and interact with members of their own and other racial/ethnic group” (Bartoli et al., 2015, p. 249). Rather than staying with the intellectual understanding of what

students know about themselves and others from a racial standpoint, students are also challenged to examine where these thoughts *land in the body at this very moment*. To help students with this step, King (2018) provided several prompts:

- “What assumptions am I silently making related to the racial microaggression and where do I feel it in my body?”
- “Am I holding privilege when it comes to my race? If so, where is this privilege, or lack thereof, felt in my body?”
- “What might I not be considering from my cultural perspective related to this microaggression (p. 91)?” “How does this reflection of what I’m missing land in my body?”

For the last step of the RAIN framework, students create personal distance away from the experienced racial microaggression. Specifically, students are invited to center self-compassion to parts that were activated within themselves and to affirm their worth beyond the moment of discomfort and harm. To help students activate self-nurturance, students are asked to reflect on a memory, place, person, or animal that brings them comfort. Students are also welcomed to draw this comforting image and take note of how their body responds to seeing this picture.

## IMMEDIATE FOLLOW UP CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

It is important to remind students about the relevancy of the RAIN framework by relating it directly to their future roles as counselors. One of the main ethical guideposts for counselors is to do no harm to clients (ACA, 2014). Instructors highlight to students how this instructional strategy provides the opportunity to practice emotional regulation in order to increase their capacity to engage in difficult conversations about race with their clients. Time permitted, the instructor can assign students in dyads to discuss reactions to the activity with curiosity and authenticity. The following prompts can be used to assist in the dyad discussion:

- “What physical sensations, emotions, or thoughts came up for you during RAIN?”
- “At what point during RAIN did you feel the most challenged?”
- “As a counselor-in-training, what are you committed to do to increase your capacity to engage in difficult discussions about race to best serve future clients?”

These questions help students unpack their reactions in real-time rather than intellectualizing or saying what might be deemed “right” to the instructor. Instead, it gives them an opportunity to communicate with their peers in a genuine and open manner on the topic of race. Such skills are essential for any counselor in training to demonstrate and perhaps even more critical when encountering difficult conversations on race.

## **ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

Students may find discussions about oppression and marginalization challenging, which can trigger strong emotional responses (Hilert & Tirado, 2019), including defensiveness and inflexibility that may impede their learning. Ahluwalia and colleagues (2019) contend that student resistance often stems from the discomfort of confronting their privilege, making it difficult for them to challenge their own biases. The RAIN framework seems well-suited to help students explore their reactions with greater openness and reduce emotional intensity that can disrupt the learning process.

Instructors are challenged to maintain safety for all students while also encouraging self-exploration, particularly when a student expresses a racial microaggression. The role of gatekeeping is paramount in such instances to ensure that students are able to witness counternarratives without harm towards each other and with future clients. One of the counseling profession's ethos is to do no harm (ACA, 2014). While racial microaggressions can occur from student-to-student, faculty members have also been identified as direct perpetrators of racial microaggressions and lacking agency to address these incidents effectively in the classroom (Curtis-Boles et al., 2020; Jones, 2023; Joseph et al., 2023; Lilly et al., 2023). Therefore, it behooves counselor educators to be honest about their own readiness to facilitate discussions on racial microaggressions, in the moment, with keen cultural self-awareness and cultural humility.

To further support student's well-being following the emotional intensity of racial microaggressions, instructors may consider including the University's Counseling Center contact information in the syllabus and reinforcing this resource at the completion of the RAIN activity, which promotes beneficence and supports institutional safeguards. Lastly, counselor educators should also avoid imposing neurotypical standards of professionalism and participation that inadvertently marginalize neurodivergent students (ACA, 2014). To accommodate diverse learners for the RAIN activity, we incorporated several teaching strategies that included adjusting time frames as warranted, using various modalities to express students' reactions (e.g., colors, symbols, diagrams), as well as engaging in dyad discussions or providing students the option to remain in individual reflection. In total, these ethical considerations posit the need for counselor educators to be reflexive about how their own intersecting cultural identities may shape the learning environment.

## **INSTRUCTOR REFLEXIVITY**

Even with scaffolded mindfulness exercises prior to the introduction of the RAIN activity, we recognized that students might remain resistant to the activity along with feelings of discomfort. As women of color, we are attuned to how our intersecting identities may activate comfort for some students and unease for others. For some, our identities may foster a sense of safety and validation. Whereas for others, our intersecting cultural identities may trigger defensiveness, discomfort, or resistance, particularly when addressing racial microaggressions. Therefore, we remained aware of how our own racial and gender dynamics influence the emotional

landscape of the classroom. Hence, we remained vigilant to not only what we communicated to our students but also how we communicated to them. For example, we were aware how our body language, nonverbals and tone can promote a learning environment of curiosity rather than judgment. Another identity that aided in the comfort of discussing race and racial microaggressions was tenure status. Specifically, the second author, who is biracial (and visibly brown skinned) found it less threatening to unpack race given her tenure status. It is noteworthy to mention the first author is a doctoral candidate and current faculty member who, yet, experienced minimal personal fear of possible repercussions for engaging in the RAIN activity.

We both found it helpful to honestly reflect upon the following four prompts before and after the RAIN activity: 1) What is my overall comfort level in unpacking race-based conversations in the classroom? Is there a particular racial group that I find more challenging to discuss than others, and where is this discomfort coming from? 2) What supports would be beneficial for students should a racial microaggression occur in the classroom? 3) Do I have the emotional capacity to sustain space for dialogue if a racial microaggression were to occur in class? and 4) What resources would I need to further enhance my emotional capacity to have race based conversations during class time? We also found it helpful to process and debrief after implementing this teaching strategy, which was optimal, as we served as co-instructors for the mindfulness course.

## SUGGESTED RESOURCES

Successful delivery of this activity would include prior scaffolding of brief mindfulness activities for students; the instructor's willingness to identify, in the moment, when racial microaggressions occur in the classroom; openness to stay with the discomfort when a racial microaggression happens in real time, as well as ample classroom time (approximately 30-60 minutes). For introductory mindfulness practices for students, we recommend sites such as [ruthking.net](http://ruthking.net), [jonkabat-zinn.com](http://jonkabat-zinn.com), and smartphone apps such as Calm, Insight Timer, UCLA Mindful, and JKZ Meditations.

Although not required for the RAIN activity, we suggest the following resources to enhance instructors' foundational learning on somatic basic practices. For those who are brand new to mindfulness practices, Kabat-Zinn's (2013) *Full Catastrophe Living* provides a hands-on approach that is based on the author's evidence-based, 8-week mindfulness-based stress reduction program. The majority of our course reading assignments were obtained from this book. To better understand racially centered contemplative practices, Menakem's (2017) *My Grandmother's Hands* and King's (2018) *Mindful of Race* are two resources to explore. Finally, Dana's (2021) *Anchored* is another resource to help ground students and instructors when navigating challenging conversations, in order to remain engaged and connected with others, rather than choosing "fight or flight" behaviors. The introductory chapter in *Anchored* can be assigned to students to help them understand the basic functions of the nervous system and how it impacts the capacity to remain connected (and at times, disconnected) with others.

# Assessment and Evaluation of RAIN

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Our aim of using the RAIN activity is to facilitate students' capacity to *slow down* in order to engage in self-awareness and full embodiment of their somatic experience when witnessing a racial microaggression in the classroom. Two types of student-facing assessments were used for this activity: 1) formal assessment via journal writing and 2) student-engagement assessment via the dyad discussion immediately following the activity. Students received participation credit for completing the journal assignment that was due a week after engaging in the class activity; however, the earned points were not contingent upon the content. Rather, the emphasis of the journal reflection is to further support students' ability to become more comfortable in exploring race openly within themselves and, hopefully, with future clients. Journaling provides another strategy to honestly and openly reflect upon students' thoughts, feelings, and somatic experiences. Due to the andragogical nature of this activity centering embodiment, the use of traditional methods emphasizing cognitive complexity for evaluation and assessment via rubrics are counterintuitive for this activity. Hence, students received full participation credit points for completing the following three prompts for this assignment: 1) In reflecting back on the RAIN activity, what did you learn about yourself as it relates to difficult conversations about race? 2) When you think about the racial microaggression that occurred in class, what comes up for you now cognitively, behaviorally, emotionally, and somatically? and 3) As a counselor-in-training, identify one concrete and feasible step to increase your capacity to sit with discomfort as it relates to conversations on race. How will you measure progress on this goal?

The effectiveness of this teaching innovation can directly relate to student learning objectives based on current 2024 CACREP standards. For example, after completing both the RAIN activity and journal assignment instructors, can assess students' capacity to: 1) "engage in self-awareness and self-evaluation strategies to enhance multicultural counseling practice; 2) to understand the impact of biases, power, privilege, oppression, and microaggressions on counselors and clients; and 3) to identify culturally sustaining and responsive strategies for establishing and maintaining counseling relationships" (CACREP, 2024, A.11, B. 5, E.7.).

Anecdotal feedback from our students was encouraging. One student reported feeling more engaged while completing the RAIN activity, which made participation easier and different from other race-based activities that put them more on the defensive. Another student expressed appreciation for the safe space and for not being put in a position to speak on the issue but could, instead, turn inward and validate their own experiences. Another student agreed and mentioned that it was meaningful to witness less participatory classmates engage in the activity with an openness and a willingness to learn. These student responses highlighted the benefits of integrating practices like RAIN to support emotional regulation and deepen their capacity to engage with difficult conversations.

## Unanswered Questions and Limitations

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The RAIN activity was conducted during a mindfulness counseling course and seemed to be well-received by our students based on anecdotal feedback. However, given our lack of empirical data collection to verify these testimonies, much remains to be explored and verified regarding the effectiveness of the activity. It is noteworthy that this particular course was an elective. Hence, it can be assumed that those students enrolled in our course had a natural inclination and comfort to engage in somatic based practices. What if somatic body work was infused throughout the curriculum when difficult conversations on race occur? Is there a threshold of mindfulness exposure necessary to observe changes in a student's racially based competencies (e.g., self-awareness, skills)? And what if students have no interest in mindfulness-based practices and somatic work? This limitation can also apply to instructors, who might have reservations to engage in mind-body practices, in general in addition to possible reluctance to help navigate difficult conversations on race in the classroom.

Another limitation involves the use of self-reports (i.e., journaling, student dyad discussion) for this teaching activity. Observing and assessing students' role play within a counseling techniques or group counseling course could demonstrate their capacity to address difficult conversations via role play and mock counseling sessions. These skills can be directly connected with a 2024 CACREP standard that highlight the students' need to demonstrate "culturally sustaining and responsive strategies" (E.7.) with clients.

## Future Studies

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Students were only exposed to the RAIN activity at one point during the semester given that the use of this activity was contingent upon a racial microaggression occurring during class time. Future studies could explore the use of RAIN to address any form of microaggression that occurs in the classroom. Qualitative studies could provide rich narratives of students' encounter of the RAIN activity, across various microaggressions, to explore their capacity to sit with uncomfortable feelings based on specific cultural identities (e.g., race, ability status, gender). With the emphasis on their somatic experience, using pre and post biofeedback measures (e.g., heart rate, muscle tension) could help identify specific physiological changes to the body when engaging in somatic-based practices after reading case vignettes featuring various forms of microaggressions and students' self-efficacy to address these scenarios. For the next course offering of mindfulness in counseling, the second author plans to conduct an autoethnographic study exploring the use of mindfulness exercises when addressing race-related topics in the classroom, including possible experiences of racial microaggressions, as a woman of color.

For instructors facilitating the RAIN activity, a quantitative study examining their self-efficacy and stress level when addressing racial microaggressions in the classroom can shed much-needed light on this process. Bentley-Edwards et al. (2020) explained how competent instructors in K-12 schools are not inherently competent in handling racial matters in the classroom. This statement could also apply to counselor educators. Using Bentley-Edwards et al.'s School-Teacher Racial Encounter Scale beyond K-12 teachers and with counselor educators in graduate-level programs could provide valuable insights into effective andragogical approaches. With promising nascent research in counseling on mindfulness teaching approaches that center on students' cognitive understanding of microaggressions, expanding the use of activities centered on somatic reactions when encountering racial microaggressions in the classroom, activities such as RAIN can offer students a fully embodied and potentially impactful learning experience.

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